The Olive Tree “Disputatio” :: by Thomas Ice

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▶ Listen

Doug Wilson:

The eleventh chapter of Romans clearly reveals the profound continuity between Israel and the Church. In this passage, Paul crafts a careful analogy of an olive tree. Unbelieving Jews were taken out of the olive tree, while believing Jew remained. At the same time, believing Gentiles were grafted into this tree. The Gentiles were then solemnly warned by the apostle not to sin in the same way the Jews had sinned, or they would certainly receive the same treatment. A central distinctive of dispensationalism is the wall of separation between Israel in the Old Testament and the Church of the New. The question which dispensationalism must, therefore, face is this- what isthe olive tree?

Thomas Ice:

What is the Olive Tree? Paul teaches (Romans 11) that the Olive Tree represents the place or stream of blessing. Before developing this I need to identify the elements composing the Olive Tree illustration: The root refers to the Abrahamic Covenant which promised blessings to both Israel and Gentiles. The natural branches are national Israel, while the wild branchesrepresent Gentiles. Thus, the Olive Tree is neither Israel nor the Church but is the place of privilege or blessing. Since the purpose of Romans 11 is to argue that God has not cast away His people- Israel (11:1), therefore, the Olive Tree illustration includes a depiction of future blessing for national Israel.

Doug Wilson:

Agreed, the root refers to the blessing promised to Abraham in the Abrahamic Covenant. That blessing was the promise of Christ (John 8:56; Heb. 11:8-10). This means that both Israel and the Church are constituent parts of the one covenant of grace seen throughout redemptive history, which is the heart of what covenant theology has stood for. If the root is the Abrahamic Covenant, then the olive tree represents the place or stream of covenantal blessing. In the olive tree, Israel and our fathers were in covenant relation to Christ (1 Cor. 10:4, 9; Heb. 11:24-26; 1 Pet. 1:11). In the olive tree, the Church stands in that same relation and must guard herself against the same temptations (1 Cor. 10:6, 11; Heb. 4:1).

Thomas Ice:

Yes, I agree, Scripture teaches that the Abrahamic Covenant does include the same gracious soteriological provision for Jews and Gentiles alike. However, Christ is only one element of the Abrahamic Covenant. Why do you ignore and overlook the several other promises in multiple repeated statements of the Abrahamic Covenant? Such biblical facts are why dispensationalists emphasize discontinuities, not in salvation, but in other aspects of the plan of God. On the other hand, covenant theology sees all aspects of the plan of God through the reductionist lens of the Covenant of Grace, which is never stated in Scripture. The two peoples of God are noted as the natural branches (Israel) and the wild branches (Gentiles).

Doug Wilson:

We have agreed that believing Jews and Gentiles are both attached to the same root, and that the root is the Abrahamic Covenant. On what exegetical basis, then, do you limit the covenantal blessings and promises which will proceed from that root to the ingrafted branches? In contrast, Paul says, ” . . . you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with thembecame a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree . . .” (v. 17) In the illustration Paul gives, we see his express statement that whatever the broken-off Jews used to have, believing Gentiles now have. He does not even hint that believing Gentiles have access only to the soteriological sap.

Thomas Ice:

The illustration does not establish which blessings flow from the root. Thus, your misguided assumption that Gentiles takeover all of Israel’ s blessings are not even hinted at in the passage. Six other texts define the scope of Abraham’ s Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18) yielding fourteen provisions, categorized into three areas: Abraham individually, the Seed (Israel), the Gentiles. Abraham is the model of salvation in the NT so that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by grace through faith alone (Gal. 3- 4; Rom. 2- 4). Romans 11 supports Paul’ s thesis that God has not rejected Israel, though they are temporarily set aside until a future time. Meanwhile, Israel (Rom. 15:27) shares ” their spiritual things” (i.e., soteriological, cf. 1 Cor. 9:11, 14) with Gentiles.

Doug Wilson:

In a tree, all blessings flow from the root. In a tree, all the branches benefit fully from partaking of such blessings. Sap flows to all branches. The illustration Paul uses is one of organic connection, and not discontinuity. In order to make the point you desire, a different image is required – say, the soil of the Abrahamic Covenant, supporting a Jewish olive tree and Gentile

peach tree. In Paul' s teaching here, believing Gentiles do not takeover Israel' s blessings; they join with believing Israel in partaking of the root and fatness of the tree. I agree this is not hinted at in the passage; it is expressly stated, both here and elsewhere (Eph. 2:11-13).

Thomas Ice:

The focus of the illustration is on the branches. Note the sequence: natural branches removed, wild branches grafted in, and then natural branches restored. This depicts discontinuity! This, combined with other passages, supports a dispensational understanding. Once again, Paul' s thesis is that God has not cast off His elect people- national Israel. You are arguing that He has. There is soteriological unity, but the Church and Israel are distinct and sequential programs. Currently individual Jews and Gentiles are joined in one body- the Church (Eph. 2- 3). There are scores of OT passages that speak of a restored Israel fulfilling her glorious reign with Christ. Paul pictures and defends the same restoration in Romans 11.

Doug Wilson:

Between verses 16 and 24, the root or olive tree is mentioned expressly seven times, and branches are mentioned six times. What is the basis of your assertion that the focus of the illustration is on the branches? And even if we focus on the branches as you request nothing really changes- natural branches are removed from the tree, wild branches grafted into the same tree, alongside believing natural branches that were never removed from the tree. The only discontinuity in this passage is that experienced by the unbelieving rebellious Jews who were excommunicated from the Abrahamic Covenant. But Paul gloriously prophecies that this is not permanent— they will be grafted back in again. Agreed?

Thomas Ice:

Romans 11 demonstrates that while Covenant Theologians may have rejected national Israel, " God has not rejected His people." The branches represent relationship to Abrahamic blessing and pass through three stages (dispensations): First, rejection because of national Israel' s unbelief. Second, Gentiles grafted in with the Jewish remnant during this age (church). Third, a future graft of national Israel when " all Israel will be saved." Discontinuity occurs between phase two and three, as with one and two, conflicting with your understanding of the passage. Paul indicates that current Gentile favor will be replaced by a return to Jewish branches, conflicting with your notion that national Israel is finished and will be saved during the current church age.

Doug Wilson:

It is not enough to assert that discontinuity exists between your phases; you must show this discontinuity using Paul' s figure of the olive tree. Discontinuity does exist between the wild olive tree and the Gentiles who were taken out of it to be grafted into the Abrahamic covenant. Discontinuity does exist between the cultivated olive tree and the unbelieving Jews who were taken out of that. But with regard to the Abrahamic covenant and all the branches organically attached to it, how is there discontinuity? Dispensationalism requires discontinuity between the connected branches of 10 B.C. and the connected branches of 40 A.D. That kind of discontinuity cannot be found in Paul' s illustration and is contradicted by it.

Thomas Ice:

You illustrate the classic error of Covenant Theology regarding Romans 11. You rightly see past discontinuity between removal of some natural branches and replacement by wild branches, which are co-equal in the church. However, you consistently ignore future discontinuity planned by God. Since past discontinuity is valid, so is the future one. This is not mere assertion, but textually derived! Don' t forget, this illustration supports Paul' s argument for a future national Israel. Your distorted characterization of dispensationalism producing two trees aids in your misunderstanding. This illustration does not deal with all issues relating to our discussion by proving or disproving the dispensational view, but it supportively allows our view, which is clarified through related passages.

Doug Wilson:

Look. The only future discontinuity prophesied is between unbelieving Israel and her unbelief. And of course there is a glorious future for ethnic Israel when grafted back in again. Paul uses an a fortiori argument to show if God can graft in wild branches, how much more will the former branches take to the tree again (v. 24). By emphasizing discontinuity you show you are looking in the wrong place, and missing the glory of the illustration. If I were to cut branches off a tree, and we were looking at it, we would see continuity looking at the tree, and discontinuity looking at branches on the ground. Why are you looking at the ground?

Thomas Ice:

I am looking at the passage. Paul' s use of the illustration is controlled by the context. You separate the illustration from contextual control by arguing from elements of a tree not featured in Romans 11. I would not emphasizediscontinuity, except to show its inclusion in the illustration. It supports a dispensational interpretation by teaching a future for, not just ethnic, butnational Israel through future conversion. National Israel was broken off; national Israel will be grafted into the tree in the future. Paul' s Olive Tree illustration does allow a future, literal fulfillment of all Abrahamic promises for national Israel. Such a future fulfillment is denied by you, even though this passage supports it.

Doug Wilson:

You say I argue from ” elements of a tree not featured in Romans 11.” Did you have an example of this in mind? And were the first-century Jews who lived in Alexandria and Damascus part of national Israel or ethnic Israel? And when national Israel is grafted back in again, where will that leave the believing Jews who remain in Brooklyn? And even granting your distinction between the two, when and where have I denied anything to a future nation of Israel? Still, these questions are all peripheral. A central issue you must address, given your scenario, is this. When national Israel is grafted back, will believing Gentiles be in the tree with them simultaneously?

Thomas Ice:

Example: suppositional statements. Israel will be regathered to Jerusalem (Mt. 24:31; cf. Dt. 30:4; Isa. 11:12; Dan. 12:1). Covenant Theology denies Israel a distinct national future. All blessing is Abrahamic, whether Israel or church. ” These three chapters emphatically forbid us to speak of the Church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people. . . . But the assumption that the Church has simply replaced Israel as the people of God is extremely common. . . . I confess with shame to having also myself used in print on more than one occasion this language of the replacement of Israel by the Church” (Cranfield ICC, Romans, II:448). Covenant Theology needs repentance!

Doug Wilson:

Consider how Paul’ s illustration would have to go in order to match your position. ” God established the Abrahamic root. From this root, the branches of national Israel grew. God then cut off all these Jewish branches, leaving a completely naked stump. Then He grafted in the believing Gentiles, along with some believing Jews He had just cut out – so that they could be in the tree, but not part of Israel. At some future date, the tree will be completely shaved again, removing all the believing Gentiles to an unspecified place. Then distinct national Israel will be grafted back in again.” This view has strengths, but being in Romans 11 is not one of them.